



Monstrous Fictions: Reflections on John Calvin in a Time of Culture War (Graven Images)

Carl J. Rasmussen

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The Reformer John Calvin has influenced America in a formative way. Calvin remains respected as a theologian to whose work intellectuals on both the right and left appeal. In the nineteen-nineties, Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) formed a politically influential ecumenical coalition to oppose abortion and change the culture. Its ecumenism of the trenches influenced the administration of George W. Bush and continues to influence religious elements in the Tea Party. Evangelicals in the coalition presume to speak for Calvin. This book provides a counter argument.

Calvin rejects the ethics advocated by ECT, an ethics of individual virtue, conscience and natural right. Instead, he affirms an ethics of obedience to the authority of secular government as an institution with a divinely ordained mandate. This work considers the following themes in Calvin:

- Calvin on Faith. Modern and postmodern philosophical approaches, including Reformed epistemology, do not explain how Calvin understood faith. Faith is divine activity. Belief is human activity. Faith is not a belief system or worldview on which to base a political theology. The author provides four Augustinian theses about Calvin on faith
- Calvin on Sanctification. Calvin rejected virtue ethics or an ethics of individual conscience. His ethics require self-denial and service. An important requirement of his ethics is obedience to government. The author provides three theses about Calvin on sanctification, as a critique of attempts to revive virtue ethics.
- Calvin on Natural Law. Calvin's doctrine of natural law is one of the most vexed issues in Calvin studies. The author provides five theses to clarify Calvin's doctrine of natural law. For Calvin, secular government transcends the authority of conscience, and Christians in conscience are required to obey it.

In conclusion, the author discusses Karl Barth's interpretation of Calvin and its relevance for the church struggle against the Third Reich. Based on his analysis of Calvin, he provides a defense of gay marriage and the right to terminate a pregnancy, as well as an analysis of religious freedom. Calvin would reject ECT's theology of virtue, conscience and natural law. But he would affirm its ecumenism as a possible path out of culture war.

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